

Zoology on the Table: Plenary Session 2

Following the second session of the forum we held a question and answer session facilitated by Thom van Dooren. The presentations covered by this plenary session were:

- Cows in the Anthropocene: Four propositions (Andrew McGregor and Donna Houston)
- Eating dingoes (Fiona Probyn-Rapsey)
- A chicken in every pot (K-lynn Smith)
- A polarising issue: Inuit use of polar bears for trophy hunting and for food (Rosie Cooney)

The following is a transcript of the plenary proceedings, lightly edited for readability.

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THOM VAN DOOREN (University of NSW – Plenary facilitator): I'll start by turning to questions from the floor.

GRAHAM PYKE (University of Technology Sydney): We've heard today particularly about kangaroos, cows, sheep, being sentient, having consciousness. It's my perspective the attributes apply probably to all of life, certainly all the animal kingdom. Therefore, why should we single out such animals for special treatment and not treat all animals the same way?

K-LYNN SMITH (Macquarie University): In the American vernacular, "Bingo!" I mean, that's exactly the point. When you look at the animals that we eat versus what we don't eat, and the decision as to what is a pet versus traded, it really doesn't follow along scientific or other logical lines. It's very much emotional and it is very problematic on how we define what's acceptable to eat and what's not, and very culturally defined instead. So, it's an excellent point.

ANDREW MCGREGOR (Macquarie University): The point you just made is, I guess, the foundations of the animal liberation movement, in terms of Peter Singer's argument that sentience is the core quality that we should be looking at in terms of thinking about relationships with other animals. There's a long tradition of people in a particular movement thinking about those sorts of ideas.

LIBBY ROBIN (Australian National University): It was a great panel; I really enjoyed all of the papers. I want to speak to Fiona's paper and ask about your philosophy of eating well, which I think is a fascinating one, and how do you decide who's the expert on eating well?

FIONA PROBYN-RAPSEY (University of Sydney): Thanks, Libby. Eating well comes from the work of Jacques Derrida, so it's not my philosophy, but for Derrida, because he is a Derridean, it remains an open question, and so that question of how one eats well is always a question of how to do ethics, and there's no one answer to that. So, it's contextual, it's cultural. But it must remain a question. I think one of the interesting

things when we talk about eating animals, is that often we begin with the assumption that we are going to eat them, and that would be not a strong foundation for doing ethics. That's actually not a strong foundation for eating well in itself. So, it's sort of an answer.

MIKE ARCHER (University of New South Wales): There is a big cultural issue here. I'd have to say eating dogs is an interesting question, because real Australians do eat dogs, and traditional Aborigines not only had them as pets, but they ate them as food when they had surpluses, and in many of the hunter-gatherer communities that I worked in, Borneo and places like that, there isn't a distinction between what's a pet and what's edible. They value the animal totally and depending on the situation that they're in culturally, they're quite comfortable with moving from a pet to an edible meal. Aren't we perhaps trapped in our own cultural perception in trying to see them as one or the other?

FIONA PROBYN-RAPSEY: Thanks, Mike. There's no disagreement there. When I use the term "real Australians" I use it ironically. So, I wouldn't want to ever use "real Australians" in a way that determined boundaries for that category.

MIKE ARCHER: I'm being mischievous.

FIONA PROBYN-RAPSEY: Yes, so am I. So, thanks for the question.

K-LYNN SMITH: I find it really interesting that we can see a cultural shift. I talk to my mother, who was born in the 1920s - and she'd shoot me for saying that - who grew up in England. They had chickens and rabbits and things like that. They'd raise them as pets and then her dad would go out and kill one and they'd have it for dinner. We're talking about going through World War II when there were rations, and we used to have that relationship with animals.

When I tell people who lived with, or had chickens as pets, or even as farmers - I tell them about their capabilities and

they go, “Yes, I know. I’ve seen that, totally.” When I tell someone who has only ever seen them wrapped in plastic, they say, “I don’t believe you. I mean, that’s impossible. How can that possibly be? It’s a chicken. It’s stupid.” And I’ve even had people say, “They only have 30 second memories. Right?” I go, “No, no. That’s goldfish you’re thinking of, and that’s not right either.” So, we’ve changed as we’ve moved away from actually growing our own food and having a relationship with animals to it being a disassociation and a delineation between pet and food.

ANDREW MCGREGOR: One of the critiques of the animal liberation movement is that it does deal with universals, and so it doesn’t necessarily reflect contextual arrangements, contextual priorities, cultural priorities, all those sorts of things, which is one of the reasons why, in my talk, which Donna and I put together, we didn’t come down hard on a particular solution. We raised some questions that people should be considering when they’re considering if they’re going to eat cow or not, or what they’re going to eat, if it’s going to be artificial meat or something else, because context does matter and it’s the sort of relationships that people have that determine what sort of decisions they’re going to make when it comes to dinnertime or whatever else. So, it’s a good point.

ELSPETH PROBYN (University of Sydney): Again, a great panel. Thank you. This discussion is making me think about metabolic intimacies, which has been variously theorised by John Law and, who did a wonderful paper about boiling pig swill. It started in the north of England, it was interrupted because farmers didn’t boil the pig swill and therefore then set off foot and mouth. The British Government intervened by banning pig swill, that is, the feeding of pigs with domestic waste. So that metabolic intimacy between the pig and the family that had endured for hundreds of years was dropped, with the outcome that the pigs are now fed soy, which is coming from Argentina or wherever, where there’s a huge devastation of environment, et cetera.

Rosie, I was really interested in that connection with the Inuit, in part because I’ve been reading about the increase of environmental ethnogenetics that are affecting First Nation communities where they’re fishing for salmon and imbibing a lot of mercury. This is having a double whammy effect in terms of further racialising an already marginalised group, which, as you pointed out, is happening with the Inuit and the polar bears. But are there also pollution issues happening in the far north?

ROSIE COONEY (University of New South Wales): There certainly are pollution issues in the north. I’m not well qualified to talk about them, but I think due to the patterns of atmospheric dispersal of certain pollutants, a lot of them end up in the north. So, it is particularly serious up there and it’s definitely showing up in the

food chain. That’s something they are very concerned about, along with climate change, which is a massive preoccupation for the peoples of the north.

ELSPETH PROBYN: I think what this new research is showing is that the way in which the environment is entering our bodies really pushes that notion of metabolic intimacy to an extraordinary extent, and I think it’s something good to think with maybe.

ROSIE COONEY: Yes, and another point on that point. A report just came out about the ingestion of microplastics that we’re all imbibing in fish and salt. So, it’s very intimately associated.

ROBYN ALDERS (University of Sydney): Thanks very much for a wonderful session. I guess my question, and it follows through from the first two sessions that we’ve had really, is about how do we reflect and make an impact here? Australia is 85 per cent urban, and what we’re hearing from you is that most people have no idea how animals are raised, where it comes from, what they’re capable of. They also don’t take much interest in our own footprint here in Australia.

So, my question is, first of all, in Australia how do we break down barriers? Farmers in Australia do have very serious mental health issues. Post traumatic stress syndrome is recognised in farmers, particularly those where they’ve had animals attacked by wild dogs to the point where they’ve left their farm. So, what I’m asking is how do we come up with a way where we see we’re all in it together? How do we come up with something that allows us to do the best we can, and how do we share information that helps us to make informed practices?

FIONA PROBYN-RAPSEY: I could mention that in relation to the sheep farmer and the rural industries and mental health issues, I totally take your point, Robyn, about that as a serious problem. I also think that arming sheep farmers with baits and guns and encouraging them to go out there and shoot things is probably not a very sensitive way of dealing with that particular scenario. I agree there needs to be investigations about how to address those issues.

I also think that, and I would reiterate this a number of times across a number of papers today - it is never just a matter of human suffering. There is animal suffering going on as well, and there’s an incredible sort of undercurrent, but also a purpose, in animal agriculture that involves violence against animals. I think there is a huge impact on people who are involved in those industries in having to inflict that violence, and whether or not it becomes recognised at an institutional level or a personal level is up to us to have those sorts of conversations, but it is a really important question.

ROBYN ALDERS: I think we also have to look at environmental harm. The choices we make also have an impact in terms of environmental harm. So, I'm all for understanding and appreciating sentiment, but thinking about the consequences of our decisions goes well beyond the individual concern.

GORDON GRIGG (University of Queensland): A question for Rosie. There's a proposal for there to be trophy hunting permitted of crocodiles in the Northern Territory. It's a proposal that comes up from time to time and, so far, is always knocked back. But there are quite a lot of parallels between the Inuit situation that you described and the Aboriginal situation, or the trophy hunting proposed in the Northern Territory, mainly because the strong argument that's put forward in support of trophy hunting crocodiles is that it will benefit the Aboriginal people, who have of course also a long history of making use of crocodiles as food in times past. I just wonder whether you'd like to comment on what you think about the trophy hunting proposal and whether Minister Hunt [the then Federal Minister for the Environment] made the right decision.

ROSIE COONEY: I can certainly share my personal view. I put a crocodile on that last slide, but I didn't have time to mention it, so I'm glad you brought that up. I think it's an analogous case. The Northern Territory has a number of times applied to the Commonwealth to include a limited amount of trophy hunting in its management plan, which has to be approved by the Commonwealth because these are species largely for export. So just like the Inuit example, there would be no additional harvest. It would basically be out of the small number of animals that are currently harvested, usually for problem animal control. Some of those would be sold to wealthy American or German tourists to shoot, and then the animal would be used in exactly the same way. So this has the potential to particularly benefit indigenous landholders.

Indigenous groups hold 30 per cent of the land in the Northern Territory, including a lot of the land in the most remote regions. There's often very few other economic opportunities. This could provide a really good incentive, an additional incentive, for things like pig control, because pigs have a very negative impact on crocodile nests; also for control of invasive mimosa, which likewise are very bad for the sites where crocodiles nest. So, yes, I think it's a proposal that has a lot of merit, and I think you do see in this example some well-organised lobbying by, again, typically urban constituencies that aren't really grappling with on-the-ground conservation livelihood issues.

GORDON GRIGG: I take it from that that you think the Minister made the wrong decision. What about the additional information that inevitably the trophy hunters will target the big, very old, very large male crocodiles, and there's quite a bit of information emerging that the big males have a big role in the

populations? Crocodiles are more social than people had previously realised, and all the 'Boss Croc' story and so on which is emerging, which is very interesting. We really know very little about the mating systems of crocodiles. So that, perhaps, does mean that there's an additional dimension that needs to be considered.

ROSIE COONEY: That's certainly something that should be considered. The animals taken, the problem animals, at the moment are often large males. It's not necessarily going to be different animals that would actually be taken under the current management regime, but certainly it should be considered. Where this has been looked at, and modelled in other species with trophy hunting, the pretty much resounding conclusion from genetic studies is that it makes no difference, because there are various safeguards that mean it has very little impact. Due to males often being post-reproductive, the harvesting being very limited in space and time, there being a lot of harvest refugia, et cetera. So, I can just share the view of Graham Webb, who's probably the most well qualified person to talk on this issue, who also thinks it would be an excellent idea, given his extensive knowledge of crocodile breeding biology.

FIONA PROBYN-RAPSEY: I just want to add that, yes, there is a problem with the sort of urban constituents advocating a particular set of politics for animal welfare in indigenous societies. Claire Kim has done some really interesting work on that. Claire Kim has analysed the Makah whaling situation with indigenous groups in Canada, and she has also observed that indigenous groups tend to be treated as homogenous in their politics. That is, they whale or they hunt, and it overlooks the internal dynamics and the ways in which animal advocacy from within those indigenous groups also is an important part of that conversation. So, I would also want to complicate that view that the homogenising occurs both ways.

ANDREW MCGREGOR: From a relational perspective, the introduction of trophy hunting to areas where there is no trophy hunting at the moment, but there is indigenous hunting, possibly has two effects: one is it commodifies that traditional hunting process so that the meanings and rationale for that hunting no longer exist because you're selling the hunting experience to someone else, so in a sense, you're changing that relationship for financial income, as you pointed out. Secondly, it solidifies the separation between humans and the animal being hunted, and I think in the Anthropocene, we've got to be more creative than extending that sort of human nature dualism that has led to the situation we're in right now. I think it's a tricky issue, but I don't think it leads to sort of solutions, apart from an economic solution, and those sorts of things for the indigenous communities, which are very important, but I'm not sure it's the right solution. I think there may be other options as well.

HAYLEY BATES (University of New South Wales): I spend a lot of my time working with 18-year-olds who take a year off after high school to travel around the world. One opportunity that I think that we have here is to encourage those students to go and spend some time out in the bush. So instead of encouraging them to go and spend time overseas, encourage them to spend a little bit of time going out helping farmers on farms, finding out where food actually comes from, learning a little bit about the natural history, and making those bonds with the environment that we used to have, and I think that's a direction that we should be heading in.

ROSIE COONEY: On this whole question of indigenous participation in commercial activity, I think there are two major risks here: that you run the risk, in a very patronising way, of making decisions for other people about what their lifestyles in the modern world should be, and boxing them into a very kind of "noble savage" idea of them having a romantic, traditional relationship to the land. That completely disallows them from participating in modern economies.

Secondly, it's the governance question of who decides. Should it be people sitting here in Sydney or in Canberra that decide on what indigenous people should do on

their land? And it's certainly not all indigenous people who want to participate in trophy hunting in Canada or in Australia, but if they do, is it us that should stop them?

ANDREW MCGREGOR: I certainly am not trying to promote an image of indigenous people as living some sort of romantic, "noble savage" life. A big part of my research is looking at reducing emissions from deforestation degradation in Indonesia. One of the things they try and do there is provide land rights to indigenous people, but indigenous people then have the choice of what they want to do, and one of the decisions they make is to change their forested land to palm oil or something like that, which is their right, absolutely.

What I'm talking about is a more general concept of whether we want to lead to a situation where we're hunting more and more animals than we already are, and different sorts of people hunting than the ones who already are hunting. But I understand what you're saying, coming from a rights based approach as well.

ROSIE COONEY: Just a final comment to say that the overwhelming threat to wild species is not over exploitation. It's habitat loss because the species has not enough value to people to counter the economic appeal of agriculture.

PHOTOGRAPHS



The audience during the second plenary.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



Andrew McGregor.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



Fiona Probyn-Rapsey.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



Fiona Probyn-Rapsey.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



K-lynn Smith.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



K-lynn Smith.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



Rosie Cooney.
Photo by Dan Lunney.



The panel during the second session (L-R): Donna Houston, Rosie Cooney, Andrew McGregor, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and K-lynn Smith.

Photo by Dan Lunney.



Thom van Dooren facilitating the second plenary with the panel (L-R): Donna Houston, Rosie Cooney, Andrew McGregor, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and K-lynn Smith.

Photo by Dan Lunney.